

## When Children Have Two Mothers: Relationships With Nonresident Mothers, Stepmothers, and Fathers

*Using data on 294 adolescents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health who live with a biological father and have both a resident stepmother and a nonresident biological mother, this study examines the prevalence, antecedents, and consequences of adolescents' closeness to each of their parents. Findings demonstrate that adolescents vary in their likelihood of having close relationships to resident fathers, resident stepmothers, and nonresident biological mothers, but when they can do so, they appear to benefit. Close relationships with both resident fathers and nonresident mothers are associated with fewer adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems. Closeness to resident stepmothers, however, is unrelated to these two outcomes. Results suggest that fathers play a particularly important role in these families.*

High rates of divorce, remarriage, and nonmarital childbearing over the past few decades have contributed to complex family arrangements including increasing rates of single parenting, step-parenting, and nonresident parenting. Although women continue to be heavily overrepresented among single parents and men continue to be heavily overrepresented among resident stepparents and nonresident parents, this gender gap has

been declining and is likely to continue to do so. For example, among single parents living with their children in 2004, 18% are men (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2005). From the standpoint of children's lives, an increasing number are living with their fathers and many will experience having "two mothers": a resident stepmother and a nonresident biological mother. Although it is unknown exactly how many children are living in such families, several trends are suggestive.

Over two million children were living with their single biological fathers in 2001 and almost another million were living with their fathers and a stepmother, together representing the living arrangements of over 4% of all U.S. children (Kreider & Fields, 2005). Given that the majority of divorced men remarry (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987), it is likely that many children living with single fathers will experience the addition of a stepmother at some point. The vast majority of children living with single or remarried fathers have biological mothers living elsewhere (Greif, 1995). Part of the rise in resident father families reflects the fact that fathers increasingly receive physical custody following divorce (Grall, 2003). The number of children living with never-married fathers, however, has also increased (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). (I herein use the term resident father to refer to fathers who live with their biological child(ren) but not with the child's biological mother, distinguishing them from both nonbiological resident fathers [e.g., stepfathers] and fathers in two biological parent households.)

The implications of these arrangements for child well-being have been of increasing concern given previous findings on the disadvantages

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faced by children in single-parent families and in stepfamilies (Amato, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), which some studies suggest may be even worse for children in single-father and father-stepmother families (Hoffman & Johnson, 1998). Further, to the extent that children's attachment to mothers is greater than to fathers, it has been suggested that children may have more difficulty adding another mother to their family than they do adding another father (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Research on children's relationships with nonresident mothers, resident stepmothers, and resident biological fathers is limited and studies rarely consider children's relationships to all three parents simultaneously.

This study employs nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to address three central questions: (a) How close are adolescents to nonresident mothers, to resident stepmothers, and to resident fathers? Relatedly, how many adolescents have close bonds to both mothers, to only one mother, or to neither mother? (b) What factors predict closeness to each parent? (c) What are the consequences for adolescent well-being of closeness to each parent? Two important indicators of adolescent well-being are considered: internalizing problems and externalizing problems.

#### *Patterns of Closeness to Parents*

This study focuses on the closeness of the parent-child bond because it is a particularly salient dimension of the parent-child relationship that is associated with better outcomes for children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Four alternative hypotheses are considered in predicting patterns of closeness to nonresident mothers and resident stepmothers. The first hypothesis (*primacy of biology*) posits that children will be closer to their nonresident biological mother than to their stepmother. This pattern may result either because the biological tie fosters closer relationships than social ties do (e.g., as suggested by evolutionary theory; Daly & Wilson, 1983) or because of the importance of children's early attachments to caregivers (e.g., as suggested by attachment theory; Bowlby, 1979) that facilitates a deeper bond between the child and the biological parent.

A second possibility (*primacy of residence*) is that children will be closer to their resident step-

mother than to their nonresident mother. Living in separate households makes it difficult for biological mothers to maintain affective bonds to children, especially when visitation is infrequent. Coresiding and interacting with children on an everyday basis can help foster closer ties between children and their stepmothers. Consistent with this view, adolescents report being closer to resident stepfathers than to nonresident fathers (King, 2006).

A third possibility (*accumulation*) is that children will have similarly close relationships with stepmothers and nonresident mothers as both mothers strive to establish good relationships with them. Research on nonresident fathers suggests that a resident parent's remarriage does not necessarily interfere with adolescent ties to nonresident parents (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004). There is no inherent reason why being close to one mother should make it difficult to be close to the other mother, especially if both mothers make a good faith effort and support each other's ties to the child (Marsiglio, 2004). Both mothers face different challenges (e.g., entering a family vs. nonresidence) and can rely on different resources (e.g., daily availability vs. early attachment) to form bonds with children that in the end lead to similar levels of closeness.

A final possibility (*irrelevance*) is that children will not be close to either mother, especially during adolescence when children are generally pulling away from family relationships (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997). Closeness to the biological mother may be compromised by distance and infrequent visitation (Stewart, 1999). At the same time, children may be unwilling to accept or establish a close relationship to a stepmother. Stepmothers may find their role difficult or unrewarding and may disengage from the relationship (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

The few studies that compare levels of closeness to stepmothers and nonresident mothers offer mixed results. Some studies suggest that children are closer to nonresident mothers than to stepmothers (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; White, 1994), whereas others suggest that children are closer to stepmothers (Berg, 2003). Prior research has not assessed how many children are close to both mothers or how many children lack close ties to either mother.

I hypothesize that the closest tie in these families will be between adolescents and their resident

fathers. Resident fathers have the advantages of both biology and coresidence on their side in helping to maintain close ties to children. Some empirical evidence supports this premise (Berg, 2003; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987).

### *Predictors of Closeness to Parents*

The same-gender hypothesis implies that children are closer to the same-gender parent, but the evidence for this is stronger for ties to fathers than mothers (Youniss & Smollar, 1985) and may operate differently in families where children have two mothers. Some studies suggest that boys visit more (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002) and feel closer to (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996) nonresident mothers than girls do, but others find no difference (Stewart, 1999). The stepfamily literature suggests that girls have more difficult relationships with stepmothers than boys do (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004) but this finding is not universally supported (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The general finding that boys are closer to their fathers than girls likely applies to father-resident children as well and may reflect one reason that boys are more likely to be living in these arrangements (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

Both parent and stepparent involvement with children decline as children get older (Stewart, 2005), and younger children are thought to be better able to attach to stepparents (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), suggesting that older adolescents will be less close than younger ones to each of their parents.

Little is known regarding the influence of race-ethnicity or immigration. Stewart (1999) found no difference between Whites and non-Whites in the frequency of nonresident mother contact. There are reasons to expect differences in children's relationships with their parents on the basis of race, ethnicity, and immigration, however. Although not a common living arrangement for any children, White children have a greater likelihood of living with a father and a stepmother than Black or Hispanic children do (Kreider & Fields, 2005), suggesting that White and nonimmigrant adolescents may be closer to their resident fathers and stepmothers. Hamer and Marchioro (2002) suggest that more difficult social and economic circumstances make custodial fathering more difficult for Black men relative to White men. The Black fathers in their study rarely initiated custody and felt ill prepared for it, suggesting

that Black children may have more strained relationships with their resident father and perhaps also their stepmother than White children. Because immigrant youth are more likely than nonimmigrants to be living in two biological parent families that espouse more traditional roles for mothers and exhibit lower levels of father involvement (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps, & Zaff, 2006), their fathers may also be less prepared to take on custody or do so under more difficult circumstances.

Parental education and income tend to foster parenting practices that promote parent-child closeness including attentiveness, sensitivity, and positive engagement while decreasing financial and emotional stress that can adversely affect parenting (Cox & Harter, 2003). Some studies, however, report few or very modest differences in parent-child relationships by parental education or household income (King, 2006).

Many studies report a positive link between marital quality and parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995). A good marriage may encourage fathers to support the stepmother-child relationship, may grant stepmothers authority to take on a parental role, and may make both parents more available to respond to children's needs (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). As for children's ties to nonresident mothers, fathers in a happy marriage may soften their attitude toward the nonresident mother and may be more agreeable to her involvement (Buchanan et al., 1996). Alternatively, fathers who are promoting ties between their new wife and children may be less inclined to support the nonresident mother-child relationship (King, 2006).

On the one hand, a longer time since the child lived with the nonresident mother is likely to be associated with less close ties to her as this is associated with less frequent contact (Stewart, 1999). Ties to stepmothers, on the other hand, may become closer the longer the stepmother has been in the child's life. Children may come to see the stepmother as an additional support rather than as a threat to their relationship with the biological mother or father, and any competition between the mothers may attenuate as the childrearing roles of each mother are successfully negotiated (Brand, Clingempeel, & Bowen-Woodward, 1988). Some studies, however, fail to find that time significantly influences stepmother-stepchild ties (Quick, McKenry, & Newman, 1994). It is less clear if the passage of time will influence father-child ties, but it might

enhance closeness to the extent that family life stabilizes in the aftermath of the divorce and remarriage.

Frequent contact with nonresident mothers is likely to be an important predictor of having close ties to her (Buchanan et al., 1996). It is less clear what influence this will have on ties to stepmothers or fathers. It might be difficult for children to have a strong relationship to both a nonresident parent and a stepparent, and having an involved nonresident parent may preclude developing strong ties to a stepparent (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). Nonresident parents may interfere in the remarried family, children can feel loyalty conflicts or may be less willing to accept a stepparent's authority, or stepparents may see less need or feel less desire to step in as a parent figure when nonresident parents are actively involved. Buchanan et al., however, found nonresident mother visitation to be unrelated to adolescent's relationships with their fathers or with their father's new partners.

Finally, in assessing an adolescent's closeness to each parent, the adolescent's relationship with the other parents needs to be taken into account. The strongest association is likely to be between closeness to the stepmother and closeness to the father (Buchanan et al., 1996). When resident fathers or stepmothers are close to their (step)child, they maybe more likely to support and foster positive ties between the child and the other (step)parent. It is less clear how closeness to nonresident mothers will be associated with closeness to stepmothers or fathers. There may be a negative association to the extent that there is conflict or competition between the two mothers or between the biological parents. Buchanan et al., however, found no association between adolescent reports of closeness to their nonresident mothers and their closeness to their resident fathers or to their father's new partners.

### *Consequences of Closeness to Parents*

The hypotheses predicting closeness also guide the predictions for the consequences of closeness to each mother. The primacy of biology hypothesis posits that children will benefit most from close ties to a nonresident biological mother, with little or no benefit accruing from ties to a stepmother. Nonresident mothers may be more committed to the child's welfare either because investments in children are fostered by the biological tie or because of early parent-child attach-

ment. Consistent with this premise, research suggests that being a stepparent is more difficult than raising one's own biological children, especially for stepmothers, and that stepmothers may compete with the child for the father's time and attention (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004).

The primacy of residence hypothesis suggests that children will benefit most from close ties to a resident stepmother, with little or no benefit from ties to a nonresident mother. Coresidence and daily interaction may foster the transmission of a stepmother's resources when she is able to develop close bonds with her stepchildren. Living in separate households makes it difficult for biological mothers to monitor their children's everyday activities, and nonresident mothers may be less able to transmit economic, parental, and community resources that are instrumental to children's healthy development. Support for this hypothesis is found in studies examining adolescents who had resident stepfathers and nonresident biological fathers whereby closeness to stepfathers predicted fewer internalizing and externalizing problems but closeness to nonresident fathers had little influence (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

The accumulation hypothesis suggests that children can benefit from close ties to both mothers and the resources that they provide; therefore, close ties to stepmothers and close ties to nonresident mothers will both predict having fewer internalizing and externalizing problems. In contrast, the irrelevance hypothesis suggests that both stepmothers and nonresident mothers are largely irrelevant for child well-being either because neither mother is sufficiently invested in the child's welfare or because other individuals (e.g., resident fathers) or resources (e.g., income) are more important for child outcomes. The disadvantages of children in single-parent and remarried households compared to children in two biological parent households are thought to derive in part from the loss of social capital associated with a biological parent's departure from the household that is not compensated for by the entrance of a stepparent (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

I hypothesize that adolescents will benefit from being close to their resident fathers in terms of exhibiting fewer internalizing and externalizing problems. Resident fathers have the advantages of both biology and residence on their side in fostering the transmission of social capital. Numerous studies report that the quality of the

relationship between resident mothers and their children is an important correlate of child well-being (Amato, 2000). It is less clear whether the influence of resident fathers will be as strong as the influence appears to be for resident mothers or what influence closeness to resident fathers will have relative to the influence of resident stepmothers and nonresident mothers. The benefits that accrue from being the resident parent may be similar for mothers and fathers. Some research, however, suggests that resident fathers may not be as involved with (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006), or as close to (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996), children as resident mothers and that resident stepmothers take over more parenting responsibilities than resident stepfathers do (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Consistent with this premise, Buchanan et al. (1996) report benefits of a close father-child relationship for adolescent outcomes in father-resident families but found these effects to be weaker than the benefits of a close mother-child tie in mother-resident families.

Prior research has not directly tested these hypotheses, although a few studies have examined some aspects of them. For example, several studies report a positive association between nonresident mother involvement and child outcomes (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004) and between stepmother warmth and child well-being (Fine & Kurdek, 1992), but none of these studies simultaneously considers the child's bond to the other mother or to the resident father.

Two notable exceptions overcome some of these limitations. The study by Buchanan et al. (1996) of father-resident families in California found modest but positive associations between adolescents' closeness to both resident fathers and nonresident mothers and several indicators of adolescent adjustment. There was also a sporadic and weak association between the adolescent's closeness to the father's new partner (whether remarried or not) and adolescent adjustment, but the adolescent's relationship with the nonresident mother was not simultaneously considered.

In the only study I found that simultaneously considered the influence of adolescent closeness to all three parents, Berg (2003) reported that closeness to both the resident father and the resident stepmother predicted adolescent self-esteem, but closeness to the nonresident mother did not. Although both these studies provide evidence for the hypothesis of positive benefits from

ties to resident fathers, Buchanan et al. (1996) provide support for the primacy of biology hypothesis that predicts a stronger effect of ties to nonresident mothers, whereas Berg lends support to the primacy of residence hypothesis that predicts a stronger effect of ties to resident stepmothers.

In the analyses of child outcomes, controls include the variables discussed earlier that are likely related to having close ties to each parent because they are also likely to be associated with child well-being. These factors include adolescent's gender, age, and race (McLeod & Owens, 2004; Skaggs & Jodl, 1999), parental education and family income (Cox & Harter, 2003), immigrant status (Bankston & Zhou, 2002), father-stepmother marital quality (Kurdek, 1994), and years lived with the stepmother (Amato, 2000).

Two potential moderating factors are also considered. First, I test whether the benefits of adolescents' relationships with each parent differs by the adolescent's gender. Researchers have speculated that children may benefit more from relationships with the same-gender parent, although evidence for this has been decidedly mixed (Buchanan et al., 1996). This same-gender hypothesis predicts that boys will benefit more than girls from closeness to the resident father but that girls might benefit more from closeness to nonresident mothers and stepmothers.

I also test whether the benefit of adolescents' relationships with one parent depends on the level of closeness to another parent. Adolescents may be better off when they are close to both the nonresident mother and the resident father and less so if they are close to only one parent (Buchanan et al., 1996). Alternatively, adolescents may be protected from adverse outcomes when closeness to one parent compensates for being less close to another parent. Perhaps, for example, the influence of stepmothers will be strong if ties to nonresident mothers are weak.

## METHOD

### *Data*

Data for this study come from the first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The full sample includes 20,745 high school and middle school students in 1995. When appropriate sample weights are used, these data are a nationally representative sample of adolescents in Grades 7 through 12 in

the United States. A parent or parent figure of each adolescent also was asked to complete a questionnaire ( $N = 17,670$ ; see Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 1997, for a detailed description of the data). The analysis sample for this study was restricted to adolescents with valid sample weights who reported that they were living with their biological father and a stepmother, and who also reported having a living nonresident biological mother ( $n = 296$ , 1.4% of the total Add Health sample). Two cases (1% of the sample selected for analysis) missing on reports of closeness to one or both mothers were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 294 adolescents.

This study focuses on the current residence of the adolescents and is defined from their vantage point; they report the information on who lives in their household and they identify whether they have a nonresident mother living elsewhere. Although some children may spend substantial time in both their biological parents' households, most children end up residing primarily with one parent (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Add Health lacks information on legal physical custody agreements, but studies find that the actual residence of children can sometimes vary substantially from the legal agreement and that changes in children's residence often occur in the absence of changes to the legal custody agreement (Argys et al., 2007; Maccoby & Mnookin). Few adolescents in the 1990s lived in families with joint physical custody agreements, only 4% by one estimate using 1997 data from a nationally representative sample of adolescents; fathers were the sole custodian in more than 12% of these families (Argys et al.).

This study is limited to a consideration of married stepmothers because adolescents in Add Health who said that they were living with their father and his cohabiting partner were not asked the stepparenting questions, which includes the key question regarding how close they are to her. Although it would be ideal to also consider children living with cohabiting stepmothers, the majority of step families, about three quarters, involve married couples (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). Stepfamilies that began as a cohabiting partnership but later married are included.

### Measures

*Closeness to parents.* In separate questions, adolescents reported how close they felt (1 = *not at all close*, 2 = *not very close*, 3 = *somewhat*

*close*, 4 = *quite close*, 5 = *extremely close*) to their fathers, to their nonresident biological mothers, and to their stepmothers. Closeness to each parent is retained as a set of ordinal variables in the analyses with one exception. To create the different family patterns examining how many adolescents were close to both mothers, closeness to nonresident mothers and to stepmothers were first dichotomized into *close* (original scores of 4 or 5) and *not close* (original scores of 1, 2 or 3) and then cross-classified, resulting in four possibilities: *close to both mothers*, *close only to the stepmother*, *close only to the nonresident mother*, and *close to neither mother*.

*Independent variables.* Adolescent's gender is a dichotomous variable (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*). Adolescent's age is a continuous variable ranging from 12 to 20 years. Race-ethnicity is measured as a set of dummy variables that includes non-Hispanic Whites (omitted reference group), non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, and all others. Income is a continuous variable reported in the parent survey that refers to the income in thousands of dollars of the household in which the adolescent lives. Missing cases ( $n = 69$ , 23%) were set to the mean, and a dummy variable was created to indicate missing cases. The log of this variable is used in the regression analyses to minimize skewness. Each parent's education is an ordinal variable that ranged from 1 = *an 8th grade education or less* to 7 = *postgraduate training*. The few missing cases (for nonresident mothers,  $n = 20$ , 7%; for stepmothers,  $n = 7$ , 2%; and for fathers,  $n = 2$ , 1%) were set to the most common response of 3 = *high school graduate/Certificate of General Educational Development (GED)*. Immigrant is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the adolescent is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*).

Father-stepmother happiness is based on the parent's report (usually the stepmother) of how happy she is with their current relationship (1 = *completely unhappy*, 10 = *completely happy*). Missing cases ( $n = 57$ , 19%) were set to 0, and a dummy variable was created to indicate missing cases, which resulted mainly from the lack of a parent interview rather than from nonresponse to this particular question. Years lived with stepmother refers to the number of years that the adolescent has lived with the stepmother. Years since lived with mother refers to the number of years since the adolescent lived with the biological mother. For adolescents who

never lived with their biological mothers ( $n = 9, 3\%$ ), this variable corresponds to their age. For two adolescents who could not remember when they last lived with her, the number of years they lived with the stepmother was substituted as a proxy measure. Contact with the nonresident mother is the average of two items indicating how often in the past 12 months (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *more than once a week*) the adolescent has stayed overnight with the mother and how often the adolescent talked with the mother in person, or on the telephone, or received a letter from her.

*Child outcomes.* Two child outcome scales were created from adolescent reports and are based on factor analytic techniques. Internalizing problems are the average of four standardized subscales. Depressive symptoms is the average of seven items ( $\alpha = .84$ ) tapping feelings in the past week (0 = *never* or *rarely*, 1 = *sometimes*, 2 = *a lot, most, or all of the time*) including feeling bothered, could not shake off the blues, depressed, that life has been a failure, lonely, sad, and that life is not worth living. Psychological distress is the average of eight items ( $\alpha = .82$ ) regarding symptoms in the past 12 months (0 = *never*, 3 = *almost every day or every day*) including feeling physically weak for no reason, feeling very tired for no reason, waking up feeling tired, poor appetite, trouble falling or staying asleep, trouble relaxing, moodiness, and frequent crying. Negative outlook is the average of four items ( $\alpha = .74$ ) tapping the absence of positive feelings in the past week including feeling as good as other people, hopeful about the future, happy, and enjoyed life (0 = *most or all of the time*, 3 = *never or rarely*). Low self-esteem is the average of six items ( $\alpha = .86$ ) regarding disagreement with statements about the self, including having a lot of good qualities, having a lot to be proud of, liking yourself, doing things right, feeling socially accepted, and feeling loved and wanted (1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *disagree or strongly disagree*).

Externalizing problems are the average of three standardized subscales. Nonviolent delinquency is the average of 10 items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) regarding whether adolescents engaged in certain delinquent behaviors in the past 12 months (0 = *never*, 1 = *one or two times*, 2 = *3 or more times*), including painting graffiti, damaging property, lying to parents about whereabouts, stealing from a store, taking a car without per-

mission, stealing from a house or building, selling drugs, being rowdy in public, stealing something worth more than \$50, and stealing something worth less than \$50. Violence is the average of eight items ( $\alpha = .85$ ) regarding whether adolescents engaged in or experienced violent behaviors in the past 12 months including serious fighting, hurting someone, using or threatening to use a weapon, group fighting (0 = *never*, 1 = *one or two times*, 2 = *3 or more times*), as well as using a knife or gun, physical fighting, being jumped, and having a knife or gun pulled on them (0 = *never*, 1 = *once*, 2 = *more than once*). Substance use is the average of six dichotomous items ( $\alpha = .84$ ) tapping moderate to heavy use including smoking cigarettes 5 or more days in the past 30 days, smoking two or more cigarettes on average when smoking in past 30 days, drinking alcohol at least three times in the past year, binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row) at least three times in the past year, getting drunk at least three times in the past year, and using marijuana in the past 30 days.

### Analytic Strategy

I begin by comparing levels of closeness between adolescents and each of their parents. Next, closeness to stepmothers and nonresident mothers is considered simultaneously. I further compare closeness to stepmothers and nonresident mothers for the full sample of adolescents ( $n = 294$ ) to subsets of adolescents who have at least some contact ( $n = 273, 93\%$ ) and who have at least monthly contact ( $n = 187, 64\%$ ) with nonresident mothers. This comparison allows an even stronger test of the relative strength of ties to resident stepmothers and nonresident biological mothers because in these families both mothers have the potential to play a role in the child's life. Nonresident mothers who have infrequent or no contact with their children have little opportunity to do so.

Next, I examine the predictors of closeness to each parent in a bivariate and multivariate ordinary least squares regression framework. Finally, the relationship between closeness to each parent and adolescent well-being is examined before and after control variables are added using ordinary least squares regression. To test for gender differences, a set of interaction terms between closeness to each parent and the adolescent's gender is added to the models. To test for interactive

processes between relationships to each parent, a set of interaction terms between closeness to one parent and closeness to each other parent is added to the models. All analyses are conducted using the Wave 1 sample weight to correct for the differential probabilities of sample selection. The survey (SVY) procedures in Stata (Stata Corporation, 2005) are used to adjust the standard errors of the model estimates for the clustered and stratified design of Add Health (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

This analysis shares some parallels with an earlier study of adolescents in Add Health ( $N = 1,149$ ) who were living with resident mothers and stepfathers and who had a nonresident biological father living elsewhere (King, 2006). Where relevant, I note similarities and differences in key findings between these two studies in the discussion section in order to further our understanding of adolescents' relationships with resident and nonresident parents.

RESULTS

*How Close Are Adolescents to Each Parent?*

As Table 1 reveals, adolescents report being closest to their biological fathers ( $M = 4.57$ ), followed by stepmothers ( $M = 3.89$ ), and then nonresident mothers ( $M = 3.56$ ). The difference in closeness to each mother is most extreme at the lowest end with 13.6% of adolescents reporting that they are not at all close to their nonresident mother but only 1.8% of adolescents reporting that they are not at all close to their resident stepmother. This finding lends support to the primacy of residence hypothesis that predicts closer relationships between children and resident stepmothers than between children and nonresident mothers.

That adolescents are closer to their stepmothers than to their nonresident mothers, however, results in large part from the fact that some of these adolescents have little or no contact with their nonresident mother. When the few ( $n = 21$ ) adolescents who had no contact with their nonresident mother in the past year are removed from the analysis sample, levels of closeness to nonresident mothers ( $M = 3.73$ ; 63.7% are close; 8.1% are not at all close) and to stepmothers ( $M = 3.87$ ; 65.9% are close; 1.9% are not at all close) are more similar, with the difference in average levels of closeness no longer statistically significant. Levels of closeness to the nonresident mother rise further still if the sample is restricted to adolescents who have at least monthly contact with her; again the difference in average levels of closeness to the nonresident mother ( $M = 3.99$ ; 73.2% are close; 3.6% are not at all close) and to the stepmother ( $M = 3.86$ ; 68.0% are close; 1.0% are not at all close) is not statistically significant. These results lend some support for the accumulation hypothesis that predicts children will have similarly close relationships to both resident stepmothers and nonresident mothers, as long as there is some ongoing contact with the nonresident mother.

Compared to both mothers, adolescents are significantly closer to their resident biological fathers with fewer than 1% reporting not being at all close to him and, at the other extreme, 92% report being quite or extremely close to him (vs. 59.5% for nonresident mothers and 66.8% for stepmothers).

*How Many Adolescents Have Close Bonds With Two Mothers?*

There is much variability in the patterns of closeness to stepmothers and nonresident mothers (see Table 2). Although not a majority, the most

Table 1. *Adolescents' Closeness to Nonresident Biological Mothers, Resident Stepmothers, and Resident Biological Fathers*

	Nonresident Biological Mothers	Resident Stepmothers	Resident Biological Fathers
Closeness (%)			
Not at all close	13.6	1.8	0.7
Not very close	8.1	10.0	1.4
Somewhat close	18.8	21.4	5.9
Quite close	28.0	30.9	23.8
Extremely close	31.5	35.9	68.2
Closeness, $M$ ( $SD$ )	3.56 (1.36)	3.89 (1.06)	4.57 (.73)

Note: All values are weighted. All means differ from one another at  $p < .05$ .  $N = 294$ .



Table 2. *Percentage of Adolescents Close to Resident Stepmothers and Nonresident Biological Mothers*

	Total	At Least Some Contact With Nonresident Mother	At Least Monthly Contact With Nonresident Mother
Close to both mothers	38	41	50
Close to neither mother	12	11	10
Close only to stepmother	29	25	18
Close only to nonresident mother	21	23	23
<i>N</i>	294	273	187

*Note:* All percentages are weighted.

common family situation is one where adolescents report being close to both mothers, 38%, whereas only 12% report being close to neither mother. Slightly more adolescents, 29%, report being close only to the stepmother than report being close only to the nonresident mother, 21%.

Table 2 also reports the patterns of closeness when the sample is restricted to adolescents who had at least some contact, and who had at least monthly contact, with the nonresident mother in the past year. Interestingly, this restriction reduces the incidence of being close only to the stepmother and increases the incidence of being close to both mothers. This finding, coupled with the fact that the percentage close only to the nonresident mother barely changes, suggests that when nonresident mothers continue to have contact with their children, they are better able to maintain close relationships with them and doing so is not at the expense of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. As nonresident mother contact becomes more frequent, adolescents are increasingly likely to report that they are close to both mothers (e.g., 50% of the adolescents with at least monthly contact are close to both). Overall, these results also provide some evidence for the accumulation hypothesis that predicts similarly close ties to both mothers.

#### *What Factors Predict Patterns of Closeness to Parents?*

Boys and girls report similar levels of closeness to their nonresident mothers (see Table 3). Black adolescents report being significantly closer to their nonresident mothers than White or Hispanic adolescents, although the difference with Hispanics does not remain significant after controls are included in the model. The positive effect of the nonresident mother's education also becomes nonsignificant after controls. Both a longer time

since the adolescent lived with the nonresident mother and a longer time that the adolescent has lived with the stepmother negatively predict closeness to the nonresident mother. Given the high correlation between years lived with the stepmother and years since lived with the nonresident mother, only the latter was included in the multivariate model, and it remains highly significant. Not surprisingly, frequent contact with the nonresident mother is strongly associated with reporting being close to her. Contact is also largely responsible for reducing the significant effect of the nonresident mother's education because her education is positively associated with her level of contact. The adolescent's closeness to the stepmother and to the biological father have little consequence for the nonresident mother-adolescent relationship, with the marginal ( $p < .10$ ) negative effect of closeness to the stepmother reduced to nonsignificance in the multivariate model.

With regard to resident stepmothers, boys report being significantly less close to them than girls do. Black adolescents report being less close to their stepmothers than White adolescents, but this difference becomes nonsignificant with controls. Adolescents in immigrant families report being significantly less close to their stepmothers than nonimmigrant adolescents. The few marginal associations ( $p < .10$ ) reported in Model 1 (with father's education, years lived with the stepmother, nonresident mother contact, and closeness to the nonresident mother) become nonsignificant in the multivariate model. Although there is little evidence that closeness to one mother precludes closeness to the other mother, closeness to the resident father is positively associated with closeness to the stepmother.

Closeness to the father is also an important factor in reducing the influence of race. Black adolescents are less close to their stepmothers than Whites

Table 3. *Unstandardized Coefficients From Regressions Predicting Closeness to Parents*

	Closeness to Nonresident Biological Mother		Closeness to Resident Stepmother		Closeness to Resident Biological Father	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Male	.04	.06	-.35*	-.39*	.16	.23*
Age	.05	.08	-.06	-.05	-.05	-.04†
Black (vs. White)	.63**	.51*	-.47*	-.05	-.58*	-.52*
Hispanic (vs. White)	-.69	-.37	.02	.26	-.06	-.12
Other (vs. White)	.51*	.44	-.42	.13	-.45	-.34
Income	.09	.10	-.15	-.14	.04	.06
Nonresident mother's education	.15*	.02	-.08	-.01	.003	.03
Stepmother's education	.05	.01	-.004	.06	-.03	-.01
Father's education	.04	-.04	-.09†	-.09	-.002	.03
Immigrant family	-.23	-.16	-.62**	-.63*	-.22	.05
Father-stepmother happiness	-.04	-.01	.06	.05	.04	.01
Years lived with stepmother	-.12***	—	.03†	.01	.01	.004
Years since lived with mother	-.10***	-.06**	-.001	—	.004	—
Contact with mother	.50***	.40***	-.09†	-.04	-.05	-.05
Closeness to nonresident mother	—	—	-.11†	-.03	-.04	.01
Closeness to stepmother	-.18†	-.07	—	—	.16**	.16**
Closeness to father	-.14	.03	.34*	.32**	—	—
R <sup>2</sup>		.37		.18		.16

Note: Model 1 displays the bivariate coefficients without other variables included. Model 2 displays the multivariate coefficients with all other variables included. Dummy variables indicating missing values for income and father-stepmother marital happiness are also in the model, but coefficients are not shown. All values are weighted.  $N = 294$ .

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

because they are also less close to their resident fathers than Whites. In addition, Black adolescents have lived fewer years with the stepmother, are more likely to be male, and are less likely to be immigrants; controlling for all these factors reduces the effect of race to nonsignificance.

Turning to the predictors of closeness to resident biological fathers, we find that boys report being closer to fathers than girls do, and this difference becomes stronger with the addition of controls, particularly controlling for the adolescent's relationship with the stepmother, which is also positively associated with closeness to the father. Boys are less close to stepmothers, and once this is controlled for, the gender difference becomes significant. Age is marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ), indicating that older adolescents report somewhat less close relationships with their resident fathers than do younger adolescents. Black adolescents report being significantly less close to their resident fathers than both Hispanic and White adolescents, although the difference with Hispanics is no longer significant in the multivariate model.

#### *What Are the Consequences of Closeness to Parents?*

Consistent with my hypothesis, an adolescent's closeness to the resident biological father is significantly associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (see Table 4). Of all the parent-child ties considered, this relationship has the strongest association with adolescent well-being. In terms of the hypotheses for mothers, the evidence most strongly supports the primacy of biology hypothesis. Close ties to nonresident mothers are significantly associated with fewer internalizing problems. A similar pattern is found for externalizing problems although the coefficient for closeness to nonresident mothers is only marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ) in the multivariate model. In contrast, closeness to stepmothers is unrelated to levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems.

Interaction tests (results not shown) revealed no support for the same-gender hypothesis. The benefits of adolescents' relationships with their nonresident mothers, stepmothers, and resident fathers did not differ for boys and girls. I also

Table 4. *Unstandardized Coefficients From Regressions Predicting Adolescent Outcomes From Closeness to Parents and Control Variables*

	Internalizing Problems		Externalizing Problems	
Closeness to nonresident mother	-.11*	-.12*	-.01	-.07†
Closeness to stepmother	-.04	-.05	-.02	.04
Closeness to father	-.26**	-.24***	-.24*	-.30***
Male		-.37***		.16
Age		.01		.07*
Black (vs. White)		-.22		-.27
Hispanic (vs. White)		-.06		-.06
Other (vs. White)		.21		.01
Income		-.03		-.02
Nonresident mother's education		-.03		.06
Stepmother's education		-.06		-.13**
Father's education		.02		.11*
Immigrant family		.45*		.05
Father-stepmother happiness		.05		.02
Years lived with stepmother		-.02†		-.04***
R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.27	.06	.24

Note: Dummy variables indicating missing values for income and father-stepmother marital happiness are also in the model, but coefficients are not shown. All values are weighted.  $N = 294$ .

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

found no evidence that the benefits of adolescents' relationships with one parent depended on the level of closeness to another parent.

## DISCUSSION

Although research finds that adolescents are generally closer to mothers than to fathers (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), this study of adolescents who reside with their fathers and have "two mothers" finds that this is one family situation in which children are closer to their fathers than to their mothers. Adolescents report being closest to fathers, followed by resident stepmothers, and then by nonresident biological mothers. Interestingly, these high levels of closeness to resident fathers ( $M = 4.57$ ) are similar to the levels reported for resident biological mothers ( $M = 4.60$ ) in families where adolescents also have a stepfather and nonresident biological father (King, 2006), suggesting that parent gender is less important

than residential status for closeness to adolescents in these types of families.

That adolescents are closer on average to resident stepmothers than to nonresident biological mothers lends some support for the primacy of residence hypothesis in predicting differences in closeness. This difference, however, is largely driven by the minority of children who have little or no contact with their nonresident mothers. When children who have at least some contact with their nonresident mother, and therefore at least some solid basis for being able to maintain ties with them, are considered, levels of closeness to nonresident mothers and to resident stepmothers are very similar, lending support for the accumulation hypothesis.

Considering patterns of closeness to both mothers simultaneously further sheds light on these issues. The most common family situation is one where adolescents report being close to both mothers, 38%, whereas only 12% report being close to neither mother. Slightly more adolescents, 29%, report being close only to the stepmother than report being close only to the nonresident mother, 21%. Again, these results are influenced by the fact that some of these adolescents have little contact with their nonresident mothers. When contact is more frequent, children are increasingly likely to be close to both mothers and less likely to be close only to the stepmother. These results also lend support for the accumulation hypothesis.

The fact that the majority of adolescents do not have close bonds with both mothers lends some support for the notion that children have some difficulty maintaining close bonds with two mothers. This pattern likely results, however, from the difficulties entailed in maintaining close ties with each mother individually rather than from closeness to one mother necessarily precluding closeness to the other mother. Results provide no evidence that levels of contact with nonresident mothers interfered with establishing close ties to resident stepmothers or that levels of closeness to one mother negatively affected levels of closeness to the other.

To further shed light on this issue, I calculated the average level of closeness to nonresident mothers for adolescents in Add Health who were living with single fathers to see if adolescents without a stepmother were closer to their nonresident mothers than these adolescents who had a resident stepmother, which might suggest that it is easier to maintain close ties to a nonresident

mother if a stepmother is not in the picture. Levels of closeness to nonresident mothers, however, were not significantly different by whether the adolescent had a resident stepmother ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) or not ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ).

Whatever difficulties children have maintaining close ties with two mothers, there is no evidence for the suggestion that children might have more difficulty adding another mother to the family than they do adding another father (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Adolescents with two mothers are more likely to be close to both of them (38%) than adolescents with two fathers report being close to both fathers (25%, see King, 2006).

Although we know little about factors that facilitate the formation of positive nonresident mother-child, stepmother-stepchild, or resident father-child bonds, this study points to several key factors. For nonresident mothers, frequent contact goes hand in hand with maintaining close ties to children. Closeness also appears to decline as the number of years since the child has lived with the mother increases. These factors have also been found to be critical for ties between adolescents and nonresident fathers (Sobolewski & King, 2005). Finally, Black adolescents report being significantly closer to nonresident mothers than White adolescents, even though levels of contact were similar (see also Stewart, 1999). A similar racial difference has been found for closeness to nonresident fathers (King et al., 2004).

In contrast, Black adolescents report being less close to resident stepmothers and fathers. Controlling for closeness to the father, a strong correlate of closeness to stepmothers, renders the association between race and closeness to stepmothers insignificant, suggesting one pathway through which race is operating. Adolescents in immigrant families also report being less close to stepmothers than nonimmigrants, suggesting that resident stepmothers may have more difficulty establishing relationships with stepchildren in these families. Finally, girls report closer relationships to resident stepmothers than boys do, in contrast to some prior research that suggests girls have more difficult relationships with stepmothers than boys do (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). It may be that gender differences in relationships with stepmothers vary by whether the stepmother is resident.

Consistent with prior research, boys report closer relationships with resident fathers than girls do, and older adolescents are somewhat less

close to their fathers than younger adolescents. As noted above, closeness to resident fathers and resident stepmothers is significantly correlated, yet these relationships are largely independent of closeness to nonresident mothers.

Race is the only factor that was found to significantly influence closeness to all three parents, suggesting a fruitful area for future research given the paucity of our knowledge with respect to racial and ethnic differences in children's relationships to parents in this type of family. Findings here suggest that Black adolescents have more difficult relationships with resident fathers and stepmothers, consistent with the observation of Hamer and Marchioro (2002) that custodial fathering is more difficult for Black men than White men.

Future research should consider additional factors that may facilitate positive bonds between children and nonresident mothers, resident stepmothers, and resident fathers (e.g., cooperative coparenting), particularly given the findings reported here regarding the consequences of these relationships for child well-being.

Consistent with my hypothesis, an adolescent's closeness to the resident biological father is significantly associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems. Of all the parent-child ties considered, this relationship has the strongest association with adolescent well-being, highlighting the important role of fathers in these families. Just as prior research indicates that children with a resident mother benefit from a close relationship with her, children with a resident father exhibit fewer problems when they are closer to him.

In terms of the hypotheses for mothers, the evidence most strongly supports the primacy of biology hypothesis, which predicts that closeness to nonresident biological mothers is more influential for child outcomes than ties to resident stepmothers. Adolescents who are closer to their nonresident mothers exhibited significantly fewer internalizing problems and marginally fewer externalizing problems than adolescents who are less close to them. Closeness to the resident stepmother was unrelated to either outcome. Further, these findings did not vary by adolescent gender, providing no evidence for the same-gender hypothesis, nor did the influence of one parent depend on ties to another parent.

The stronger association between adolescent outcomes and ties to nonresident mothers compared with ties to stepmothers stands in contrast

to the results reported in prior research on resident mother families where close ties to resident stepfathers are more strongly associated with positive adolescent outcomes than ties to nonresident biological fathers (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001), suggesting important differences in the role of nonresident parents and stepparents by gender. One possibility for this difference is the significantly greater level of closeness between adolescents and nonresident mothers ( $M = 3.56$ ) compared with adolescents and their nonresident fathers ( $M = 2.99$ ; King) that may afford nonresident mothers a stronger role in influencing child outcomes.

An unanswered question for future research to explore is why close ties to resident stepmothers do not result in better outcomes for adolescents despite the fact that adolescents report being closer on average to resident stepmothers than to nonresident biological mothers and as close to nonresident biological mothers who maintain contact with their children. Perhaps stepmothers influence child well-being through more indirect pathways. For example, remarriage often strengthens a resident parent's parenting (Buchanan et al., 1996), and stepmothers maybe instrumental in supporting the resident father-child relationship, which in turn, enhances child well-being. Although closeness to stepmothers was not associated with adolescent internalizing or externalizing problems, future research should consider whether closeness to stepmothers is more consequential for other child outcomes.

This study is limited by examining the relationships between children and their parents at a single point in time. Although the findings are based on national data, they are limited to families with older children, most of whom are adolescents. Future research would benefit from a life course perspective that focuses on children's relationships to their parents as they evolve and change over time along with other important events such as changes in custody or child's residence, changes in the partnership status of either biological parent, and the presence, addition, and quality of relationships with full, half, and stepsiblings. Further, the reciprocal nature of the relationship between parents and children should be examined. The models in this study assume that parent-child closeness affects adolescent outcomes, but it is also possible that the adolescent's behavior affects the parent-child relationship such that children who exhibit fewer problem behaviors more easily elicit the warmth

and supportiveness of their parents. This possibility cannot be ruled out in this study because it relies on cross-sectional data.

This study is also limited by the lack of information in Add Health on the circumstances surrounding the parents' separation and the reasons for the child being in father residence. To my knowledge, no national data are currently available to address such issues. The limited information we have in this regard is based on small, unrepresentative samples. These studies suggest, however, that the route to father residence may be different from the more common occurrence of mother residence after separation (Greif, 1997). For example, often multiple and varied reasons are given for father residence including mother's financial, employment, educational, or emotional difficulties; mother's difficulties in handling the children; avoiding court battles; and the child's preference (Herrerias, 1995). Future research would also benefit from considering other types of resident father families including single fathers and cohabiting fathers. Children's relationships to their fathers and nonresident mothers, as well as any benefits associated with these relationships, may vary among these different family forms and by the different routes in which they came about.

An increasing number of U.S. children are living with their fathers and have both a resident stepmother and a nonresident biological mother. This study makes important contributions toward understanding how adolescents relate to each of their parents in this type of family, the factors that promote close ties, and the consequences of these ties for their well-being. Findings demonstrate that adolescents vary in their likelihood of having close ties to each of their parents, but when they do so, they appear to benefit. Close relationships with both resident fathers and nonresident mothers are associated with better adolescent outcomes, with ties to resident fathers being particularly consequential.

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